

**STATEMENT OF
SENATOR E. BENJAMIN NELSON
OF NEBRASKA
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
JUNE 26, 2001**

I appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement regarding the Great Plains Tribes' legislative priorities for the 107th Congress. Working closely with Native Americans was a priority for me when I was Governor of Nebraska, and I wish to continue that support as Senator. I look forward to working with the Santee Sioux, Ponca, Winnebago, and Omaha tribes in Nebraska this session to assist them in reaching their legislative goals.

It is my hope as a freshman senator, that I can foster relationships with my colleagues – on both sides of the aisle – that will prove to be productive in advocating for the tribes in Nebraska, as well as for all the tribes of the Great Plains area. I believe it is important that Congress diligently work to improve the lives of Native Americans, who often find that resources are too scarce to meet even their most basic needs.

One area where services have historically lagged behind the needs of tribal members is health care. I support fully funding Indian Health Service. It is essential to the overall well being of Native Americans that adequate medical services are available to lower infant mortality and to treat chronic diseases, such as diabetes, which are prevalent in Indian populations. One specific project in Nebraska that is a priority for me is an expansion of the Ponca Health and Wellness Center in Omaha. The Center provides much needed medical, dental, and pharmaceutical services in the Nebraska and Iowa region. Members from a number of tribes use the Center, and increased funding for these important services is vital to tribal members in the Omaha area.

Adequate medical services are also necessary to curb substance abuse among Native Americans. I am committed to supporting the Ai Ki Ruti substance abuse treatment center on the Winnebago Reservation. This is one of the few substance abuse treatment centers serving Native Americans in northeast Nebraska. The center services not only the Winnebago Tribe, but also members of the Santee Sioux, Omaha, Ponca, South Dakota Sioux, and Wyoming Northern Cheyenne tribes. I strongly support funding for construction and program development for the Ai Ki Ruti Halfway House. Extending services of the Ai Ki Ruti treatment center in this manner will help residents achieve a healthier lifestyle through a supportive living environment.

In addition, it is my hope that we can commit resources to adequately fund education and job training programs that are vital to tribal communities. In Nebraska, our two tribal colleges provide members with an opportunity to further their education and gain job

skills that are crucial to improving their quality of life. I fully support our tribal colleges and believe they serve an important need in our state.

I believe Congress should encourage efforts by tribes to spur economic development in their communities. One economic development project I believe is worthy of continued support is the InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC). I support full funding of the ITBC's bison enhancement projects on tribal lands, as well as ITBC funding for job-training activities related to the reintroduction of bison to native cultures. Supporting the efforts of the ITBC is an effective way to foster economic development on tribal lands, which in turn furthers the tribes' goal of becoming economically self-sufficient.

In addition to working with this Committee on legislation of importance to Native Americans, I hope to use my position on the Agriculture and the Veterans' Affairs committees to further the goals of the Great Plains tribes. As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I plan to ensure that Indian agriculture is properly represented in our discussion of the farm reauthorization bill. It is essential to recognize the role the Great Plains area tribes play in the farming and ranching community.

It is also important to remember that Native Americans are the largest ethnic minority group that has served in the United States military. I would like to use my position on the Veterans' Affairs committee to raise the profile of Indian veterans and advocate for the quality services that are due to them because of their important contribution to our country.

In addition to the above-mentioned projects, I would like to take this opportunity to convey to the Committee my support for S. 434, the Yankton Sioux Tribe and Santee Sioux Tribe Equitable Compensation Act. This bill would compensate the Santee Sioux Tribe of Nebraska and the Yankton Sioux Tribe of South Dakota for losses the tribes suffered when the Fort Randall and Gavins Point dams were constructed on the Missouri River as part of the Flood Control Act of 1944.

As a result of the construction of the dams, approximately 600 acres of land located near the Santee village and 400 acres on the Niobrara Island of the Santee Sioux Reservation were flooded. The flooding of this land resulted in the relocation of several families and dramatically affected the economies of the tribes. Although the tribes received some compensation through condemnation proceedings, these settlements did not reflect the true value of the productive agriculture land that was involved in the taking, the inflation of property values, or rehabilitation funds to which many tribal members were entitled. S. 434 seeks to address these inequities.

The bill, which was introduced and reported out of committee last year, has the support of both the Nebraska and South Dakota Senate delegation. I encourage the Committee to

act favorably, and expediently, on this bill this year so that the Santee Sioux and Yankton Sioux tribes can begin to be compensated for their losses.

Finally, I would like to briefly comment on the issue of the Santee Sioux tribe's efforts to retrocede criminal and civil jurisdiction over the Santee Sioux Reservation from the state of Nebraska back to the United States. The Nebraska Legislature passed a resolution last month supporting the retrocession. The tribe has expressed concern that the Bureau of Indian Affairs plans to block retrocession for the Santee Sioux Tribe because of lack of funds to meet the tribe's law enforcement needs. I strongly encourage the BIA to keep open a constructive dialog with the Santee Sioux tribe to work toward a satisfactory resolution of the retrocession issue.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit my comments to the Committee regarding these important issues. I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Committee, as well as with the tribes in my state, in promoting their legislative priorities.